



EMERGING TRENDS IN UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to look into a host of studies in the realm of literary scholarship and socio-cultural study on violence and terrorism to understand how the contemporary paradigm of terrorism is being constructed. The attack on World Trade Center, New York, USA on September, 2001 and its ten-year anniversary has been used as a point of reference because apart from ushering a new phase in the world politics, it also renewed critical interest about the nature and origin of terror, and the reasons behind acts of terrorism. Most of these studies seek to generate sustainable insights about the phenomenon of terrorism in order to bring about a resolution to the problems that leads to acts of extreme violence. But this paper intends to argue that many of these social – cultural and literary studies are premised on universalizing notions of terrorism. In some of these literary scholarships where a vast array of fictions on terrorism are chosen and careful attention is paid to their authors terrorists and novelists are seen as agents of revolutionary change who actualize and fictionalize spectacular acts of violence to change an unjust social order. Studies in socio-political fields on the other hand are premised on the notion that terrorism manifests an opposition to Western conditions of modernity and originates in failure to communicate in a shared language. While this paper acknowledges the copious information these studies offer on the past and present of terrorism, it also argues that their ultimate assumptions about the nature and origin of terrorism rest on broad universalizing conceptions. The romanticization of terrorists and novelists as agents of change, or categorization of terrorism as the opponent of modernity and contemporary dialogue overlooks the specific contexts and history of conflicts across the globe. This paper intends to foreground that instead of universal grand narrative, attention to emerging micro narratives of conflict would bring about a more sustainable understanding of terrorism and help resolve the conflict in question.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Terrorism, Violence, Conflict, Communication, Modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The ten-year anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, on September 11, 2001, assessed the continuing impact of the events – in the domains of politics, culture and community and eventually history. This assessment of the event as an epochal moment had begun in the immediate aftermath of the attacks and had gained momentum since. The most pronounced and conspicuous political fallout of this attack has been the emerging discourses 'War on Terror' forwarded politically by the Bush administration resulting in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (and also generating political/sociological debate about the credibility of the invasion); an unprecedented rise in security and surveillance measure; an accompanying mood of understanding the latest paradigm of violence and terrorism. It is this latter aspect that I primarily seek to explore in this paper. The ripples of these multiple ramifications were and still are being felt for over a decade even after the end of the Bush administration in the United States of America and the beginning of a different political climate under President Barack Obama that symbolically terminated the US military aggression. One of the realms where the traces of the attacks have been distinctively felt is that of the fields of literature and culture. If the proliferation of the textual encounter, and direct and oblique references to the attack in a host of cultural text is considered as some kind of indication, it is evident that what Martin Randall refers to as the "symbolic" (Randall 2014), and what I call the representational is pervasively (and somewhat perversely) haunted by the attacks. From a series of direct testimonial details premised on pains physicality in that moment contributing to a collective cultural trauma, to narrative(s) gliding across cultures and multiple temporalities one can detect the vast possibilities of

narratives that have employed to "look into" the event and assimilate the carnage into the realms of understanding what is violence and its relation to terrorism. Furthermore, the sociological, cultural studies have also formed an equally important canon to understand terrorism. This paper will into a few important non fictional study – in the fields of literary criticism and sociology and political Science to assess the how the contemporary paradigm of understanding terrorism is being constructed. This paper argues that the dominant discourses of understanding terrorism have either naively romanticized a generic conception of revolutionary violence or have defined it as a failure of communication.

Understanding Terrorism: The Contribution of Literary Scholarship

Margaret Scanlan's *Plotting Terror* (Scanlan, 2001) published shortly before the attack on the World trade Center in 2001 is significant in what they articulate and what they do not, in addressing themes/ concerns leading to the haze surrounding the shifting permutations between terror (and its "ritualized" lethal manifestation), conflict, violence, and writing/representing it.

Scanlan conducts a study of some contemporary novels about terrorism that address questions about writing and violence. She selects a host of novels written by authors as diverse as Henry James, Doris Lessing, Joseph Conrad, or Don DeLillo; those that specifically dwell on the relation between artists and revolutionaries. In doing so she foregrounds her own, and these litterateur's response to some pressing concerns about the reason behind acts of violence – real and representational based on the assumption that "writers and terrorists in these novels [are] remnants of a romantic belief in the power of the marginalized

person to transform the society” (Scanlan, 2001). Premised on the “paradoxical affiliation between our violence and our fiction” – both being stylized constructs- Scanlan, in reading these novels responds to some pressing concerns about “representing violence” (Scanlan, 2001). As she points out, these novels (and her book) anticipate “the alliance between storytelling and power, the tendency of art to convert violence into an enthralling spectacle, and [...] the distortions of the victim's narrative- become- bestseller” (Scanlan, 2001). But beyond these *Plotting Terror* primarily uses “insurgent terrorism” as an “occasion for exploring the romantic idea of a writer as rebel and for questioning romanticism's optimism about literature's social power” (Scanlan, 2001). The image of the dissident writer who is some sort of an intellectual double or doppelganger of a terrorist dominates Scanlan's study. Their dissidence to the scheme of things as they exist is literally inscribed (and not just psychologically) in their act of “plotting” terror – in words and in action. In this sense the literary discourse (fictions that engage with terror in particular) is similar to terrorist violence. Or else why would, Scanlan asks, writers as diverse (in style and content) as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Doris Lessing or even Don DeLillo be irresistibly drawn to writing about terror? Fictionalizing violence is not too different from staging actual physical violence to send a message for change. Thornton's defining one liner – “the symbolic act of violence” – is as true of the author as it is of the revolutionary (Scanlan, 2001). Thus, the novels Scanlan selects for her study concentrates on artists and terrorists (who fictionalize and actualize acts of terror) as they encounter each other with the writer as terrorist's rival, double and victim. To emphasize the relevance of this affinity between authors and revolutionaries Scanlan cites an interesting instance of the prime accused in the 1995 Oklahoma bombings who admired “Turner Diaries”, a fiction about a revolutionary takeover of United States by a right-wing organization. In a later stage of the investigations the media and also the federal agents found dangerous similarities between Joseph Conrads novel *Secret Agent* first published in 1907 and the spirit of anarchy and non-conformism that triggered the bombings in the first place. Yet the trajectory of fictions and authors engaging with terror reveal the ultimate futility of writing and staging violence. In a world dictated by popular media words and violent actions are ultimately doomed. Serious terrorist fiction Scanlan observes, express the “agency panic” of writers and revolutionaries where the endless stream of sounds and images of popular journalism reign as the new age game changer.

It is this persistent anxiety (much of post 9/11 scholarship focuses on the live telecast of history and diminishing individuality it signaled) that emerges as the strongest adversary to artists and revolutionaries alike. Scanlan observes “terrorists succeed when they seize headlines. Yet this very success means that they and their causes are understood in terms set by popular journalism” (Scanlan, 2001). But a world in which individuals are just adjuncts of a larger system that absorbs the personal voice is not a contemporary phenomenon. Scanlan observes that the anxiety that torments the author in DeLillo's novel *Mao II* (here the author is supplanted by a photograph and myth surrounding it and even his voluntary involvement as a negotiator to a terrorist group fails to salvage his identity as an individual artist) is also pervasive in Lessing's novel *The Good Terrorist* and Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* both of whom had witnessed anti state violence from close quarters.

Taking cue from DeLillo's *Mao II* (DeLillo, 1992) about the “curious knot that binds terrorists and novelists” the authors of “*Crimes of Art and terror*” connect a vast array of diverse

authors and texts (both literary and cinematic) ranging from William Wordsworth, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, with documented acts of terrorists and “political extremism”, to argue that terrorists and writers share a kindred spirit of defiance (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003). It is this daunting spirit of dissidence that lies at the core of Romanticism and other avant-garde literary movements. Avoiding a certain linear master discourse of transgression, the authors explore a series of “interwoven, and mutually illuminating case studies”, juxtaposing literary movements, authors or texts with actual acts/ actors of terrorism and political extremism (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003). Indicating the astounding subversive energies in the core of art and terrorism, the authors compile a series of provocative juxtapositions: of avant-garde movements, artists, or texts with those who have actualized an act of transgressive violence. For instance, Wordsworth's manifesto is read alongside the manifesto of the American domestic terrorist Unabomber, (also known as the philosopher criminal), Dostoevsky and his protagonist in *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 2003) is placed against Henry Abbott, a compulsive murderer, to reveal affinity in impulses behind art and terror. To use the authors' phrase both (authors and terrorists in general) are “lethal believers” who try to break the old to make a new order through a Lucifer- like act of imagination. What likens artists and terrorists with the image of Lucifer is that - “the destructive [and consequently transformative] power of art that underwrites aesthetic value” (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003). Stockhausen, the musician the authors refer to invokes Lucifer, as “the cosmic spirit of rebellion” and elucidates that a work of art is attested essentially by this creative destruction personified in Lucifer (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003). The metaphor of Lucifer, as is obvious in this context does not emphasize malevolence, but quite the reverse. Lucifer is metaphor of the “very figure of artistic ambition (the arch-criminal artist) with which the author identifies” and which fuels extremism-literary, political, or religio-political. (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003)

The Limited Understanding of Terrorism Literary Criticism

To discerning readers the most serious after reading these studies is how do literary scholarship responds to the complex coordinates of terror, and its *aesthetic representation*? (emphasis mine) The thematic core and the methodological structure of both these books are variants of a fundamental spirit of iconoclasm manifested in apocalyptic art, and acts of terror. The authors (of these two books) indulge on a notion of the artists (and their art) and terrorists as compatriots, with cudgels sworn to bring about a symbolic, a historic (thus, somewhat mythologised) cleansing of the inner life of a culture, and struggling, (as Scanlan observes) in a sense to assert their commitments against a system where their individuality and choice become media fodder. Notwithstanding their genuine endeavor to locate terrorism and violence within a larger tradition of individual/ collective resistance, there is, in both these approaches, a marked absence of understanding and acknowledging each act of extremism and every individual perpetrator against its very own, very specific political/ social milieu and ideological context. These texts obscure the distinct narrative of conflict, and commitment in each of this acts that lie beyond the universal spirit of protest. Needless to say, Scanlan's skepticism about the very worth of dissidence, or for that matter writing at all in this day and age have become the mainspring of many writings post 9/11. But writers and researchers including Scanlan skirts the most problematic aspects of terrorism as they treat the woes of artists and terrorists in isolation: the shifting political, geopolitical, and cultural permutation of terror, conflict and violence. Also, a significant strategy has been an apparent effortless eliding of the profoundly epistemological,

historical, identarian and visual resonances of the topic. In most novels that Scanlan deal with terrorism is a prop and the novel is subject to the litmus test to judge the worth of literature and artists. If a sense of existential void and limbo is one approach to respond to terror, the other is a sense of paranoia madness and failure of language. However, the full potential of the latter is not explored. These studies despite their methodological ingenuity reveal a blank page of history.

Approaches to Terrorism in Socio – Political Studies: Dominant trends and its Limits

Despite methodological diversities the agreement among current social-scientific explanations is that terrorism is reactive, defensive, is the consequence of an anti-Western sentiment and an inability to cope with modern life. One of the seminal works that has provided a compellingly large, bold and even visionary argument about the new phase in world politics in post-cold war era is Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Huntington, 1996). Here the West is defined in terms of a commitment to individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state. Arrayed against it are often opposing identities and movements implicitly understood to be united as agents of disorder.

Relatively contemporary approaches like Jason Franks's *"Rethinking the Roots of Terrorism"* (2006) have used the approaches of conflict study to understand terrorism and stretching its boundary beyond the state centric legitimacy approach to integrate Conflict studies with terrorism. Recognizing that modern modes of conflict are no longer interstate in nature but more complex. Citing similar studies on these emerging and more complex form of conflict new forms of conflict are asymmetrical, diverse and disparate and characterized by "attrition, terror and violence against civilians" (Franks, 2006).

Another dominant trend in understanding terrorism is to diagnose the phenomenon as a distrust in the acceptable idioms of communication. Terrorism in general and terrorists in particular have often been accused of undergoing a deep anxiety about the power and efficacy of language. Richard E. Rubenstein argues terrorism originates in despair for language (Rubenstein, 1987). Rubenstein argues terrorists turn to spectacular violence when words fail. If we look beyond the apparent oversimplification in this statement, we would notice that a certain failure to use the shared discourse of language is also an accepted definition of madness. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Giovanni Borradori asks whether terrorism is wholly a political act (Borradori, 2003). Habermas' answer illuminates the political subtext and the more complex subjective interpretation of terrorism. He insists on understanding how the biographies of many terrorists reveal the failure of existent political orientation and their transition to the religious orientation of politics as a "new and subjectively more convincing language [...]" (Borradori, 2003).

Despite methodological divergences these studies are essentially based on two major universalizing assumption of terrorism as failure to communicate in the shared language of civilization. The second is a pervasive opposition to Western categories of modernity and politics. To understand the reasons behind this dismissal and also shared language it is necessary to use a critical historicism and to traverse the vast and overlapping field of violence, migration, exile, nationhood, ethnicity and globalization. An approach that pays careful attention to the

various micro narratives of violence, nationhood and migration rather than explaining modern terrorism from a universalizing perspective may provide a more sustainable insight into phenomena of massive violence.

CONCLUSION

The emerging trends reveal three major approaches to terrorism and violence. Literary scholarship has associated fictions about violence and actual acts of terror to project a romanticized view of both writers and terrorist who want to bring about revolutionary change in an otherwise unequal, unjust world. Sociological and cultural studies which offer a more structured approach to terrorism and violence on the other hand view terrorism as a failure or antagonism to a shared mode of communication and a refusal to accept the prevailing conditions of modernity in politics and culture that is espoused by the West. Both these approaches are founded on grand narratives of two kinds. But these approaches – as this paper has tried to analyse in its limited scope – offer a universal narrative which is generic in nature. A rigorous understanding of terrorism lies in understanding the specific contexts, history and micro narratives of conflicts across the globe rather than resorting to a overarching broad narrative. Such nuanced attention to these multiple micro narratives alone can be instrumental in bringing about a resolution to conflict and terrorism.

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